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## Hours of teaching differ for schools

### Some students aren't getting required time in their classrooms

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Where a student attends public school in the five-county metropolitan Milwaukee area can make a difference of as much as four weeks' time in the classroom per year, according to data reported to the state.

For the last two school years, the school districts of Burlington, Cudahy, Kettle Moraine, Mukwonago, Slinger, South Milwaukee and Wauwatosa reported that most - if not all - of their schools held classes at least 65 hours longer than the minimum hours set by state law.

Meanwhile, the Oak Creek-Franklin and Waukesha school districts met for the minimum amount of hours, and a large number of schools in the Milwaukee Public Schools system fell below the standard in 2006-'07.

"There's nothing more important than time with the classroom teacher," said Tony Evers, deputy superintendent of the state Department of Public Instruction. "And, if that's continually taken away, the state of Wisconsin would have an obligation that doesn't happen."

By and large, most public schools in Milwaukee, Ozaukee, Racine, Washington and Waukesha counties reported similar annual total instructional hours for their students for the past two years, the only years for which data was available from the DPI.

At least three-quarters of the counties' schools required to comply with the school-time law reported hourly totals within 65 hours below or above the state minimum during that time, the equivalent of 10 days, or two school weeks, of 6 ½ hours per day.

State law and a DPI administrative rule mandate that districts hold school for at least 175 instructional days and that they provide at least 437 hours of direct pupil instruction in kindergarten, at least 1,050 hours in grades one through six, and at least 1,137 hours in grades seven through 12.

Even though the DPI has clear guidelines on how to count those hours and subjects the data to random audits, some officials questioned accuracy of the numbers filed with the state. Reports for the 2006-'07 school year have yet to be independently audited.

Milwaukee Public Schools fell three days short of the 175-day minimum requirement for annual instruction, and had about five dozen schools fail to meet their minimum hours last school year. Superintendent William Andrekopoulos blamed the situation on inclement weather that influenced administrators to cancel school three times in 2006-'07.

The numbers don't include charter and alternative schools, which are exempt from meeting the rules.

"There were schools that were not compliant; we recognize that," Andrekopoulos said. "At the end of the day . . . we felt confident that we did not have to make up the lost time due to inclement weather."

He said that in general, "We're very clear on trying to make sure that our schools meet the minimal threshold." Yet even without the bad-weather days, several MPS schools, including schools in the Washington High School building, were well-short of the state's minimum.

MPS spokeswoman Roseann St. Aubin said administrators would look into the reasons why three schools in the Washington High School building missed the state standards each by at least 50 hours during the past school year to determine what might need to be done.

### **Penalties may be waived**

The state likely will issue MPS a retroactive waiver to the law, with the understanding that such occurrences be avoided in the future, Evers said. Withholding state aid, he said, is an option if a district repeatedly fails to meet the requirements.

Studies have found only a weak connection between time students spend in school and their achievement, said David Berliner, an education professor at Arizona State University who has studied the effects of instructional time on learning.

What is important and has a strong link to student performance is the amount of time students are on task and engaged in subject material, which he said can range from 50% to 90% of classroom time depending on the teacher.

But schools can't increase students' learning time by reducing their time in school, officials agree.

A school that allocates 30 minutes per day of a 180-day school year to teaching math has only 90 hours devoted to the subject a year, he said.

With the expectations growing for public schools, especially those that serve low-income students in the nation's urban centers, some are looking to increasing school time as an option.

### **Longer school year a trend**

Leaders in Minnesota, Delaware and New Mexico as well as in Philadelphia and Washington, D.C., have proposed lengthening either the school day or year to give their students more time to learn, according to a report released earlier this year by non-partisan think tank Education Sector.

Massachusetts has 19 schools that have agreed to add at least 300 hours to their school year this fall.

"We have a lot of kids that don't have learning opportunities after school and on the weekends and the summers, and we know from research that those kids fall behind, and we're under increasing pressure to find learning opportunities for those kids," said Education Sector's Elena Silva. "That means we need to be creative about how we develop those opportunities. We might have to open schools longer. We might have to look to our after-school movement."

Even though his school system does not report holding classes for as long as others in the area, Waukesha Superintendent David Schmidt said he feels no pressure to change.

Some Waukesha schools have after-school activities and tutoring available for students who need it, he said. And some students do well enough they probably don't need more class time, he said.

"If time is used wisely in school, we have enough time to do what we need to do," Schmidt said.

### **Teacher time**

Professional development and collaborative staff time also are important to schools.

Many school districts hold early-release days or schedule days off during the school year to provide their staffs with training or collaboration opportunities, which can mean less time with students.

But in the Wauwatosa School District, where parents rebelled when officials tried to institute early-release days for employee collaboration, Underwood Elementary School parent Sandra Hollander questioned why staff couldn't use weekends rather than take time away from students.

"People working 10 hours a day can't see how my child has to suffer and lose learning time for (teachers) to get educated. I guess for the business world, it's hard to understand," she said.

Although there hasn't been a conscious effort to increase time in South Milwaukee schools, Superintendent David Ewald said doing so is common sense.

In addition to scheduling five days for teacher training separate from the students' school year, the district has added features such as block scheduling to increase the amount of class time for middle and high school students while reducing transitions between classes.

"Good judgment would say the more time available, the expectation would be we get higher results," Ewald said.

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